



Automatthew's Friend

By Stanislaw Lem

A certain robot, planning to go on a long and dangerous voyage, heard of a most useful device which its inventor called an electric friend. He would feel better, he thought, if he had a companion, even a companion that was only a machine, so he went to the inventor and asked to be shown an artificial friend.

"Sure," replied the inventor. (As you know, in fairy tales no one ever says "sir" or "ma'am" to anyone else, not even to dragons, it's only with the kings that you have to stand on ceremony.) With this he pulled from his pocket a handful of metal granules, that looked like fine shot.

"What is that?" said the robot in surprise.

"Tell me your name, for I forgot to ask it in the proper place of this fairy tale," said the inventor.

"My name is Automatthew."

"That's too long for me, I'll call you Autom."

"Autom's from Automaton, but have it your way," replied the other.

"Well then, Autommy my lad, you have here before you a batch of electrofriends. You ought to know that by vocation and specialization I am a miniaturizer. Which means I make large and heavy mechanisms small and portable. Each one of these granules is a concentrate of electrical thought, highly versatile and intelligent. I won't say a genius, for that would be an exaggeration if not false advertising. True, my intention is precisely to create electrical geniuses and I shall not rest until I have made them so very tiny that it will be possible to carry thousands of them around in your vest pocket; the day I can pour them into sacks and sell them by weight, like sand, I will have achieved my most cherished goal.

But enough now of my plans for the future. For the time being I sell electrofriends by the piece and cheaply at that: each costs as much as its weight in diamonds. You'll see, I think, how very reasonable the price is, when you consider that you can put an electrofriend in your ear, where it will whisper good advice and supply you with all kinds of information.

Here's a bit of soft cotton, you stop up the ear with it so your friend won't fall out when you tilt your head. Will you take one? If you think you'd like a dozen, I might be able to arrange a discount..."

"No, one will do for now," said Automatthew. "But I'd like some idea of what I can expect of it. Will it be able to help me in a difficult situation?"

"But of course, that's what it's for, after all!" replied the inventor

good-humoredly. He shook out on his palm a bunch of the granules, which glittered metallically, being made of rare metals, and continued:

"Obviously you can't count on help in the physical sense, but we are not speaking of that, I think. Helpful hints, suggestions, cogent comments, sensible recommendations, good observations, admonitions, warnings, words of caution, as well as comfort, solace, encouragement, maxims to restore your faith in yourself, and deep insights that will enable you to cope with any situation, no matter how serious or even grave - this is only a small part of the repertoire of my electrofriends. They are wholly devoted, staunch, true, ever vigilant, because they never sleep; they are also unbelievably durable, esthetic, and you can see for yourself how very handy! So then, you are taking only one?"

"Yes," said Automatthew. "But there's another thing: could you tell me what happens if someone steals it from me? Will it return? Or bring about the thief's destruction?"

"As for that, no," answered the inventor. "It will serve him just as diligently and faithfully as it did you. You can't ask too much, my dear Autom, it will not desert you in your hour of need if you do not desert it. But there is little chance of that - if you will just place it in your ear and always keep the ear plugged up with cotton..."

"Very well," agreed Automatthew. "And how am I to speak to it?"

"You needn't speak at all, whisper subvocally and it will hear you perfectly. As for its name, I call it Alfred. Alf or Alfie will do."

"Good," said Automatthew.

They weighted Alfred, the inventor received for it a lovely little diamond, and the robot, content that he now had a companion, a fellow soul for the distant journey, proceeded on his way.

It was most pleasant traveling with Alfred, which, if he so desired it, would wake him each morning by whistling inside his head a soft and cheerful reveille; it also told him various amusing anecdotes, however Automatthew soon forbade it to do this when he was in the presence of others, for they began to suspect him of lunacy, seeing how every now and then he would burst into laughter for no apparent reason. In this manner Automatthew traveled first by land, then reached the seashore, where a beautiful white ship awaited him. He had few possessions, thus in no time at all was ensconced in a cozy little cabin and listening with satisfaction to the clatter that announced the raising of the anchor and the start of the great sea voyage. For several days the white ship merrily sailed the waves beneath a beaming sun, and at night, all silvered by the moon, it rocked him to sleep, till early one morning a terrible storm broke. Waves three times higher than the masts buffeted the ship, which

creaked and groaned in all its joints, and the din was so dreadful that Automatthew did not hear a single word of the many comforting things Alfred was no doubt whispering to him during those unpleasant moments.

Suddenly there was an ungodly crash, salt water burst into the cabin, and before the horrified eyes of Automatthew the ship began to come apart.

He ran out on deck just as he was, and had barely leaped into the last lifeboat when a monstrous wave loomed up, fell upon the vessel and pulled it down into the churning ocean depths. Automatthew did not see a single member of the crew, he was alone in the lifeboat, alone in the midst of the raging sea, and he trembled, certain that the next roller would sink the little boat and him along with it. The wind howled, from the low clouds torrents lashed the heaving surface of the sea, and he still could not hear what Alfred had to say to him. Then in the confusion he observed some blurry shapes covered with a seething white; this was the shore of an unknown land, upon which the waves were breaking. With a loud scrape the boat ran aground on some rocks, and Automatthew, thoroughly drenched and dripping salt water, set off on shaky legs, with the last of his strength, seeking the refuge of the land's interior, as far away as possible from the ocean waves. At the foot of a rock he sank to earth and fell into a dreamless sleep of exhaustion.

He was wakened by a tactful whistling. It was Alfred reminding him of his friendly presence.

"Ah, how splendid that you're there, Alfred, only now do I see what a good thing it is to have you with, or rather, in me!" cried Automatthew, recovering his senses. He looked around. The sun was shining, the sea was still choppy, but the menacing high waves had disappeared, the thunderclouds, the rain. Unfortunately the boat had disappeared as well.

The storm must have raged in the night with incredible force, sweeping up and carrying out to sea the boat that had saved Automatthew. He jumped to his feet and began running around the shore, only to return in ten minutes to the very same spot. He was on a desert island, and a small one in the bargain. Not a particularly encouraging state of affairs. But no matter, he had his Alfred with him! He quickly informed it of just how things stood and asked for some advice.

"Ha! Humph!" said Alfred. "A situation indeed! This will take a bit of thought. What exactly do you require?"

"Require? Why, everything: help, rescue, clothes, means of subsistence, there's nothing here but sand and rocks!"

"H'm! Is that a fact? You're quite sure? There are not lying about

somewhere along the beach chests from the wrecked ship, chests filled with tools, utensils, interesting reading, garments for different occasions, as well as gunpowder?"

Automatthew searched the length and breadth of the beach, but found nothing, not so much as a splinter from the vessel, which apparently had sunk all in one piece, like a stone.

"Nothing at all, you say? Most peculiar. The considerable literature on life on desert islands proves irrefutably that a shipwrecked person always finds at close hand axes, nails, fresh water, oil, sacred books, saws, pliers, firearms, and a great number of other useful items. But if not, then not. Is there at least a cave in the rocks providing shelter?"

"No, there is no cave."

"What, no cave? Whoo, this is unusual! Would you be so good as to climb onto the highest rock and cast an eye around?"

"I'll do it right away!" cried Automatthew, and scrambled up a steep rock in the middle of the island, and froze: the little volcanic island was surrounded on all sides by limitless ocean!

In a faltering voice he conveyed this news to Alfred, adjusting with a shaky finger the cotton in his ear, so as not to lose his friend. "How lucky I am that it didn't fall out when the ship went down," he thought and, suddenly feeling fatigued, sat on a rock and waited impatiently for friendly assistance.

"Now pay attention, my friend! Here is the advice I hasten to give you in this difficult predicament!" finally came the tiny voice of Alfred, so eagerly awaited. "On the basis of the calculations I have made, I conclude that we find ourselves on an unknown island which represents a kind of reef, or more precisely the summit of an underwater mountain chain that is gradually emerging from the depths and will join the mainland in three to four million years."

"Forget about the million years, what should I do now?!" exclaimed Automatthew.

"The island lies far from all lanes of navigation. The chance of a vessel accidentally appearing in the vicinity is one in four hundred thousand."

"Good Lord!" cried the castaway, despairing. "This is terrible! What then do you advise me to do?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, if you will just stop interrupting. Proceed to the edge of the sea and enter the water, more or less chest-high. In that way you will not have to bend over unnecessarily, which would be cumbersome. Next you immerse your head and take in as much water as you possibly can. The stuff is bitter, I realize, but that will not last long. Particularly if at the same time you continue marching forward. You'll soon grow heavy, and the salt water, filling up your entrails, will in the twinkling of an eye halt all organic processes and

thereby instantly terminate your existence. Thanks to this you will avoid the prolonged torment of life upon this island, also the eventual anguish of a lingering death, not to mention the likelihood of losing your sanity prior to that.

You might, in addition, hold a heavy stone in each hand. This is not necessary, however..."

"You're mad!" shouted Automatthew, jumping up. "So I'm to drown myself? You urge me to commit suicide? Some helpful advice, this! And you call yourself my friend?!"

"Indeed yes!" Alfred replied. "I'm not a bit mad, madness doesn't lie within my capabilities. I never lose my mental balance. All the more unpleasant would it then be for me, dear friend, to be there while you found yourself losing yours and slowly perished in the rays of this

scorching sun. I assure you, I have carefully analyzed the entire situation and one by one ruled out every possibility of rescue. You will not make a boat or raft, you haven't the materials for that; no ship will come and save you, as has been already pointed out; neither do airplanes fly over the island, and you in turn cannot build yourself a flying machine. You could, of course, choose a slow death over one that is swift and easy, but as your closest friend I strongly advise you against so foolish a decision. If you would only take a good, deep breath of water..."

"Your good, deep breath of water be damned!!" screamed Automatthew, quivering with rage. "And to think that for a friend like this I parted with a beautifully cut diamond! You know what your inventor is? A common thief, a swindler, a fraud!"

"You'll surely retract those words when you have heard me out," said Alfred quietly.

"You mean there's more? What now, do you intend regaling me with tales of the afterlife that waits in store? Just what I need!"

"There is no life after death," said Alfred. "I shall not attempt to deceive you, for I neither wish nor indeed am able to do so. This is not how I understand the duty of a friend. Only listen to me carefully, dear Automatthew! As you are aware, though in general one gives no thought to it, the world is a place of infinite variety and richness. In it you have magnificent cities, filled with mingled voices and fabled treasures, you have royal palaces, hovels, mountains enchanting and drear, murmuring groves, tranquil lakes, torrid deserts and the endless snows of the North.

Being what you are, however, you cannot experience at a time more than one single, solitary place among those I have mentioned and the millions I have not. It can therefore be said - without exaggeration - that for the places in which you are not present you represent, as it were, one who is dead, for you are not enjoying the

pleasures of palace wealth, nor taking part in the dances of the countries of the South, neither are you feasting your eyes upon the rainbow ices of the North. They do not exist for you, in exactly the same way that they do not exist in death. By the same token, if you use your mind and ponder well what I am telling you, you will realize that in not being everywhere, that is, in all those fascinating places, you are nearly nowhere at all. For there are, as I said, millions upon millions of places to be, while you are able to experience this one place only, an uninteresting place, unpleasant even, in its monotony, bah - repulsive, this little island here of rocks. Now between 'everywhere' and 'nearly nowhere' the difference is enormous and it constitutes your normal lot in life, for you always have been in only one, single, solitary place at a given time. On the other hand between 'nearly nowhere' and 'nowhere' the difference is, quite honestly, microscopic. And so the mathematics of sensations proves that even now you can barely be considered alive, for your absence is everywhere, like one departed! That is the first thing. Secondly: gaze upon this sand mixed with gravel, which digs into your tender feet - do you consider it invaluable? Assuredly not. Behold this great quantity of salt water, its revolting abundance - is it of use to you? Hardly! Here are some rocks and there, above you, a broiling sky that dries up the joints in your limbs.

Do you need this unendurable heat, these lifeless, burning boulders? Of course you don't! And therefore you have absolutely no need of all the things surrounding you, of that on which you stand, of that which spreads above you from horizon to horizon. What will remain, if one takes this away? A little hum in the head, a pressure in the temples, a pounding in the chest, some trembling at the knees, and other such chaotic agitations. Do you need, in turn, this hum, pressure, pounding and trembling? Not one whit, dear Automatthew! And if this also is relinquished, what then remains? A few racing thoughts, those expressions - very like curses - which in your heart you are hurling at me now, your own friend, and in addition to this a choking anger and a sickening fear. Do you need - I ask you finally - this wretched terror and this futile rage? Obviously you can do without them. If then we take away those useless feelings as well, what

is left is nothing, nothing, I tell you, zero, and it is precisely this zero, this state of infinite patience, unbroken silence and perfect peace, that I wish for you, as your true friend, to have!"

"But I want to live!" howled Automatthew. "To live! To live!! Do you hear me?!"

"Ah, but we are speaking now not of what you experience, but of what you desire," answered Alfred calmly. "You wish to live, in other

words to possess a future which will become your present, for this - after all - is what living amounts to. There is nothing more to it than that. But live you will not, for you cannot, as we already determined. The only question then is in what manner you will cease to live - whether in protracted agony or, instead, easily, when with one quick gulp of water..."

"Enough! No more! Go away! Get out!!" screamed Automatthew with all his might, jumping up and down with his fists clenched.

"Now what is this?" returned Alfred. "Putting aside for the moment the insulting form of that command, which does bring to mind our declaration of friendship, really, how can you express yourself so unreasonably? How can you say to me 'Get out'? Do I have legs, on which I might depart? Or even arms, to crawl away? You know perfectly well that such is not the case. If you wish to be rid of me, then kindly remove me from your ear, which - I assure you - is not the most convenient place in the world to be, and throw me somewhere!"

"Fine!" yelled Automatthew in a hurry. "I'll do it right now!" But in vain did he dig and poke in his ear, using his finger. His friend had been too carefully wedged within him and in no way could he extract it, though he shook his head in all directions like one insane.

"That evidently isn't going to work," Alfred observed after a long pause. "it would appear that we shall not part, though this is neither to your liking nor to mine. If so, then it is a fact we must accept, for facts have this about them, that the truth is always on their side. Which applies equally - I note in passing - to your current situation. You wish to have a future, and at any price. This seems to me the height of folly, but very well, so be it. Permit me then to depict this future for you in rough outline, since the known is always preferable to the unknown. The anger which presently convulses you will shortly give way to a feeling of helpless despair, and this, after a series of efforts - as violent as they will be unavailing - to find some avenue of escape, will yield in turn to a mindless stupor. Meanwhile the driving heat of the sun, which reaches even me in this shaded portion of your person, will, in accordance with the unrelenting laws of physics and chemistry, dry out more and more of your entire being. First the oil in your joints will evaporate off, and the last movement will cause you to squeak and creak dreadfully, poor devil! Next as your skull begins to bake in the searing heat, you will see

whirling circles of various colors, but this will bear no similarity to a rainbow, because..."

"Will you be quiet, you intolerable pest?!" cried Automatthew. "I don't want to hear what's going to happen to me! Silence, not another word, do you understand?!"

"You needn't shout. You know perfectly well that your every

whisper, however low, can reach me. And so you do not wish to learn of the torments that your future holds? Yet on the other hand you wish to have that future? How illogical! Very well, in that case I will be silent. I only point out that it is inappropriate for you to be concentrating your anger on me, as though I were to blame for this highly regrettable situation you are in. The cause of the misfortune was, of course, the storm, which I am your friend and my participation in the tortures that await you, that entire spectacle - divided into acts - of suffering and slow death, even now it grieves me to think upon it, yes, the horrifying prospect of what will happen when your oil..."

"So you won't stop then? Or is it that you can't, you little monster?!" bellowed Automatthew, and struck himself a blow in the ear that housed his friend. "Oh, if only I had here, in my hand, a stick of some sort, a piece of a twig, which I could use to pry you out, I'd do it and grind you beneath my heel in no time!"

"You dream of destroying me?" said Alfred, saddened. "Truly, you do not deserve an electrofriend, nor any other sympathizing fellow creature!"

Automatthew flared up anew at this and so they quarreled, argued and disputed till the day was almost over, and the poor robot, exhausted from all his screaming, jumping and fist-waving, and suddenly feeling very weak, sat down on a stone where, heaving sighs of hopelessness every now and then, he stared out at the empty ocean. A couple of times he took the edge of a small cloud peering out over the horizon for the smoke of a steamship, but these illusions Alfred quickly dispelled, reminding him of the one-in-four-hundred-thousand probability, which again drove Automatthew to paroxysms of despair and rage, all the more in that each time, as it turned out, Alfred was right. Finally a long silence fell between them. The castaway now gazed at the lengthening shadows of the rocks, which stretched across the white sand of the beach, when Alfred spoke:

"Why do you say nothing? Can it be that those circles I mentioned are even now swimming before your eyes?"

Automatthew did not bother to reply.

"Aha!" Alfred went on, in monologue. "So it's not only the circles but, in all likelihood, also that mindless torpor which I so accurately predicted. Remarkable, really, the lack of sense displayed by an intelligent being, particularly when beset by circumstances. You trap it on a desert island, where it must perish, you prove to it as two and two are four that this is inescapable, you show it a way out of the situation, in the taking of which, it will be making the only use it can of its will and reason - and is it thankful? Oh no, it wants hope, and if there is none and can be none, it clings to false hope and would rather

sink into madness than into the water which..."

"Stop talking about the water!!" croaked Automatthew.

"I was only demonstrating the irrationality of your motives," answered Alfred. "I no longer urge anything upon you. That is, any action, for if you wish to die slowly, or rather, by wishing to do nothing in general, you undertake that type of dying, then one must think this through properly. Consider how erroneous and unwise it is to fear death, a state that deserves, rather, vindication! For what can equal the perfection of nonexistence? True, the agony leading up to it does not, in itself, present an especially attractive phenomenon, on the other hand there has never yet been one so feeble in mind or body that he could not endure it and proved unable to die his death completely, all the way and to the very end. It is not, then, a thing of much significance, if any dolt, weakling and good-for-nothing can do it. And if absolutely everyone can handle it (and you must admit that this is so, I at least have never heard of anyone unequal to the task), it is better to think with delight on the all-merciful nothingness that lies just beyond its threshold. Because, when one has passed away, it is impossible to think, inasmuch as death and thought are mutually exclusive, and therefore when else, if not while still in life, is it fitting to contemplate - sensibly and particularly - all those privileges, conveniences and pleasures which death will bestow so generously upon you?! Picture if you will: no struggles, no anxieties

or apprehensions, no suffering of the body or the soul, no unhappy accidents, and this on what a scale! Why, even if all the world's evil

forces were to join and conspire against you, they would not reach you!

Truly, nothing can compare with the sweet security of one who is no more! And if furthermore you consider that this security is not something transient, fleeting, impermanent, that nothing may repeal or intrude upon it, then with what boundless joy..."

"Drop dead," came the weak voice of Automatthew and, accompanying those laconic words, a short but pungent oath.

"How I regret that I cannot!" Alfred instantly replied. "Not only feelings of egoistic envy (for there is nothing to compare with death, as I've just said), but the purest altruism inclines me to accompany you into oblivion.

But alas, this is not possible, since my inventor made me indestructible, no doubt to serve his constructor's pride. Truly, when I think of how I will remain inside your brine-encrusted, desiccated corpse, whose disintegration will go slowly, I am sure, and how I will sit there and converse with myself - it fills me with sorrow. And all the waiting there will be, afterwards, before at last that one-in-four-

hundred-thousandth vessel, in keeping with the laws of probability, chances upon this little island..."

"What?! You will not waste away here?!" exclaimed Automatthew, roused from his lethargy by these words of Alfred. "Then you will go on living, while I, while I... Oh no! Not a chance! Never! Never!! Never!!!"

And with a dreadful roar he leaped to his feet and began to hop, jerk his head, dig in his ear with all his might, performing throughout the most amazing twists and tosses with his body - in vain, however. While all this went on, Alfred piped at the top of his voice:

"Now really, stop! What, have you lost your mind already? It's too soon for that! Careful, you'll hurt yourself! You could break or maybe sprain something! Watch out for the neck! Come, this makes no sense! It would be a different thing if you could, well, get it over with all at once... but this way you'll only injure yourself! I told you I'm indestructible and that's that, it's useless for you to go to all this trouble! Even if you were to shake me out, you still couldn't do me any harm, that is, any good - I meant to say - since in accordance with what I have already expounded at such length, death is a thing to be envied. Ow! Stop, please! How can you jump about like that?"

Automatthew however continued to hurl himself, heedless of everything, and finally took to ramming his head against the rock on which he had been sitting before. And he rammed and rammed, with sparks in his eyes and a cloud of powder in his nostrils, deafened by the force of his own blows, until Alfred popped suddenly from his ear and rolled between some stones with a faint cry of relief, that it had finally ended. Automatthew did not at first notice that his efforts had met with success. Sinking down upon a sun-scorched stone, he rested there awhile, and then, still unable to move his arms or legs, mumbled:

"Don't worry, it's only a momentary weakness. I'll shake you out yet, yes, then under the heel you go, my dear friend, do you hear? Do you hear? Hey! What's this?!"

He sat up quickly, aware of an emptiness in his ear. He looked around, his mind not altogether clear, and, getting down on his hands and knees, began feverishly hunting for Alfred in the gravel.

"Alfred! Aaaal-fred!!! Where are you? Answer me!!" he hollered all the while. But Alfred, whether out of wariness or for some other reason, didn't make a sound. Automatthew then began to lure it with the tenderest words, assured it that he had changed his mind, that his only desire was to follow the good advice of his electrofriend and drown himself, he only wanted first to hear it say once more how wonderful death was. But this didn't work either, Alfred said nothing. Then the castaway, cursing up and down, systematically began to

search inch by inch the surrounding area.

Suddenly, in the middle of throwing away a handful of gravel, Automatthew raised it to his eyes and started trembling with evil delight, for among the pebbles he spotted Alfred, a dully gleaming, serenely shining tiny grain of metal.

"Ah! There you are, my little chum! There you are, old speck! I have you now, my fine, forever-lasting friend!" he hissed, carefully squeezing between his fingers Alfred, which didn't make so much as a peep. "And now we'll see about that indestructibility of yours, yes, we'll test it out right now. Take that!!!"

These words were accompanied by a powerful concussion; having placed his electrofriend on the surface of a rock, Automatthew jumped upon it with all his weight, and for good measure pivoted on his steel heel until it made a screech. Alfred said nothing, only the rock seemed to complain beneath that grinding drill; bending over, Automatthew saw that the tiny granule hadn't been touched, only the rock under it was a trifle dented.

Alfred now lay in that small depression.

"Strong, are you? We'll find a harder stone!" he growled, and began running back and forth across the island, looking for the toughest possible flints, basalts and porphyries, in order to crush Alfred upon them. And as he pounded it with his heels, he spoke to it with affected calm, or sometimes hurled insults at it, as if in the expectation that it would reply or perhaps even burst into pleas and entreaties. Alfred however said nothing. The air carried only the echoes of heavy thuds, trampling, the crumbling of stone and the panting and searing of Automatthew. After a long time Automatthew came to the conclusion that the most terrible blows would in fact cause Alfred no harm, and, feverish and weak, he sat once more upon the shore, his electrofriend in his hand.

"Even if I cannot smash you," he said with seeming composure, though barely able to control his rage, "have no fear, I will take proper care of you. For that vessel of yours will have to wait, my good friend, since I shall throw you to the bottom of the sea and there you will lie for an eternity or more. You will have abundant time for pleasant meditations in that so hermetic solitude! I will see to it you do not gain a new friend!"

"My dear fellow," said Alfred unexpectedly. "And what will it matter to me, to live on the ocean floor? You think in the categories of an impermanent being, hence your error. Understand that either the sea must someday dry up, or else first its bottom will rise like a mountain and become land. Whether this happens in a thousand years or in a hundred million is of no consequence to me. Not only am I indestructible, but infinitely patient, as indeed you might have

observed, if only by the calm with which I endured the manifestations of your blindness. I'll tell you more: I did not respond to your calls, but rather let you search for me, for I wished to spare you unnecessary excitement. Also I was silent while you jumped on me, so as not to increase your fury with an inadvertent word, since this could have done you further injury."

Automatthew, upon hearing this noble-minded explanation, shook with renewed anger.

"I'll smash you! I'll grind you to dust, you, you bastard!!" he bellowed, and that crazy dance among the rocks, the leaps, the lunges, the stamping in place, began all over again. This time however the well-wishing squeaks of Alfred joined in:

"I don't think you can do it, but let's give it a try! Go ahead! And again! No, no that way, you'll tire too quickly! Legs together! That's right - and up! One-two, and-a-one, and-a-two! Jump higher, higher, the impact will be greater! What, you can't? Really? Don't have it in you? Ah yes, yes, now there's an idea! Drop a rock from above! That's it, good! Try another? Don't have any larger? One more time, now! Wham! Bam! Go to it, dear friend! What a shame I can't pitch in and help! Why are you stopping? Worn out so soon? What a shame... Well, no matter, I can wait, you rest yourself! Let the breeze cool you off..."

Automatthew collapsed with a clatter on the rocks and gazed with burning hatred at the metal grain that lay in his open hand, and he listened - he could not choose but listen - as it spoke:

"If I were not your electrofriend, I would say that you are behaving disgracefully. The ship went down on account of the storm, you saved yourself along with me, I gave you what advice I could, but then, when I failed to come up with a means of rescue, since that was impossible, you made up your mind - for my words of simple truth and honest counsel - to destroy me, me, your only companion. It's true that in this way you at least acquired some purpose in life, so for that alone you owe me gratitude. Strange, though, that you should find so hateful the thought of my surviving..."

"Surviving? That remains to be seen!" snarled Automatthew.

"No, really, you are too much. Here's a thought. Why not place me on the buckle of your belt? It's steel, and steel I think is harder than rock. Worth a try, though personally I'm convinced it's quite useless, yet I'd like to be of help..."

Automatthew, albeit with a certain reluctance, finally followed this suggestion, but all he succeeded in doing was cover the surface of his buckle with tiny pit holes, produced by frenzied blows. When even the most desperate of his strokes proved harmless, Automatthew fell into a truly black despair and, sapped of strength, stared dully at the metal mote, which spoke to him in its high-pitched voice:

"And this is supposed to be an intelligent being! He falls into a deep dejection because he cannot wipe off the face of the earth the only fellow creature he has in all this dead expanse! Tell me, dear Automatthew, aren't you just a little ashamed of yourself?"

"Shut up, you worthless chatterbox!" hissed the castaway.

"Why should I shut up? If I'd wished you ill, you know, I would have shut up long ago, but I remain your true electrofriend. I will keep you company in your death agonies like a steadfast brother, no matter what you do, and no, you will not cast me into the sea, my dear, for it is always better to have an audience. I will be the audience of your final throes, which thereby surely will turn out better than they would in utter isolation; the important thing is emotion, it matters not what kind. Hatred for me, your genuine friend, will sustain you, give you courage, lift up your spirits, impart to your groans a true and convincing ring, also it will systematize your twitchings and bring order to each of your last moments, and that is no small thing... As for myself, I promise I shall speak little and avoid commenting, for were I to do otherwise, I might - without meaning to - break you with an excess of friendship, which you could not withstand, since to tell the truth you have a nasty character. However I shall manage this as well, and, by returning kindness of unkindness, conquer you, and in this way save you from yourself - out of friendship, I repeat, but not blind friendship, for affection does not close my eyes to the baseness of your nature..." These words were interrupted by a roar that issued suddenly from the breast of Automatthew.

"A ship! A ship!! A ship!!!" he shrieked wildly and, jumping to his feet, began to run back and forth along the shore, hurling stones in the water, waving his arms with all his might, but mainly screaming at the top of his voice until he grew completely hoarse - all without need, for a ship was clearly approaching the island and before very long had sent out a rescue boat.

As it developed later, the captain of the vessel that had carried Automatthew, just before it sank, succeeded in sending a radiotelegram calling for help, thanks to which that region of the sea was scoured by

numerous ships, and it was one of these that found the island. As the rowboat with the sailors neared the shore in shallow water, Automatthew's first impulse was to jump into it himself, but after a moment's thought he ran back for Alfred, fearing the latter might raise a cry, which others might hear, and that could lead to embarrassing questions, possibly even accusations made by his electrofriend. To avoid this, he grabbed up Alfred and, not knowing how or where to

hide it, hurriedly inserted it back into his ear. There followed effusive scenes of greeting and thanks, during which Automatthew conducted himself very noisily, afraid that one of the sailors might overhear the tiny voice of Alfred. For all this time his electrofriend was saying, over and over: "Well, but this was really unexpected! One chance in four hundred thousand... What amazing luck! I would hope now that our relations improve, yes, we shall get on splendidly together, especially as I refused you nothing in your moments of greatest trial, besides which I can be discreet and know how to let bygones be bygones!"

When, after a long voyage, the ship came to port, Automatthew surprised everyone by expressing a desire, incomprehensible to them, to visit a nearby ironworks, which boasted a great steam hammer. It was said that in the course of the visit he behaved somewhat strangely, for, having gone up to the steel anvil in the main shop, he began shaking his head violently, as if he intended to knock the very brains out through his ear and into his raised hand, and he even hopped on one leg; those present, however, made as if they didn't notice, judging that a person so recently rescued from terrible straits might well be given to eccentricities, the product of an unbalanced mind. And indeed, afterwards Automatthew changed his former way of life, seemingly falling into one mania after another. Once he gathered explosives of some sort, and even tried setting them off in his own room, the neighbors however put a stop to that, they went straight to the authorities; and for once, for no apparent reason, he took to collecting hammers and carborundum files, telling his acquaintances that he planned to build a new type of mind-reading machine. Later on he became a recluse and acquired the habit of conversing with